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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 000539

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/27/2009

TAGS: PHUM PGOV ZI

SUBJECT: PRAYER DAY GOES SMOOTHLY; NCA MARCH PLANNED NEXT MONTH

REF: HARARE 495

Classified By: Political Officer Win Dayton under Section 1.5 b/d

¶1. (U) Public prayer events (reftel) addressing a host of political and economic issues were conducted relatively smoothly on March 27 in Harare and Bulawayo. At Bulawayo's Catholic Cathedral, a host of clerics, including Archbishop Pius Ncube, a few South Africans, a Zambian, and a number of Zimbabweans spoke to a crowd of 3-400 (including poloff) about the need for national reconciliation. Speakers generally projected a moderate tone, with South Africans emphasizing the solidarity of their congregations with suffering Zimbabweans. A Zimbabwean urged all Zimbabwean congregations to set aside a time during the work week on a regular basis to pray for resolution of the national crisis. Ncube's intervention was the most provocative of the group; the speaker who introduced him quoted from the American Declaration of Independence on the need to throw off the shackles of tyranny and Ncube castigated as "liars" those who pretended Zimbabwe's situation was "normal." The Harare gathering of about 500, which was dominated by evangelical church groups, was similarly measured in its tenor. Speakers included one Zambian and one Botswanan, the latter of whom quoted from Martin Luther King on the imminence of long-awaited change.

¶2. (C) National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) President Lovemore Madhuku told poloff March 27 that the NCA was planning its next public march the weekend of April 17-18. He advised that a centralized single march that weekend would be followed up the following week with a host of dispersed marches in an effort to raise the profile of public ire and to challenge an increasingly complacent regime. He acknowledged that intimidation, apathy and emigration were severely handicapping the organization's ability to turn people out. Illustrating emigration's devastating effect on Zimbabwean civil society, he noted that about 80 percent of those "in the front row" of NCA marches in the run-up to the constitutional referendum of 2000 had left the country. Those remaining were demoralized, and recruiting new energy was a challenge. He noted the chilling effect posed to mass action of new laws permitting a month's detention without bail. He asserted, however, that GOZ detention of a large number of demonstrators for more than a couple of days would pose logistical and morale challenges for an unenthusiastic police force and a public relations problem for the government.

¶3. (C) COMMENT: The prayer events represented the largest unobstructed gatherings of regime critics in recent memory. In February 2003, several clerics were arrested and some beaten when they demonstrated publicly against the GOZ. GOZ indulgence of these events now may reflect a calculation that civil society will have difficulty developing meaningful momentum. Indeed, the prayer events, which were planned for months, could have been better engineered. The churches' extensive network and an advertisement in a weekly newspaper did not result in wide public knowledge of plans; in the week before they were held, other diplomats and even the mayor of Bulawayo -- certainly most of the public -- were unaware of their existence. Should the churches (or any other organization) show capacity to sustain a perceptible level of publicly displayed criticism, we would expect the GOZ to act more forcibly against them. It likely will show less restraint if the NCA proceeds with its planned marches next month.

¶4. (C) COMMENT (CONT'D): Absorbed by election preparations and internal organizational issues, the opposition MDC has maintained a relatively low profile on the streets amidst these periodic low level public demonstrations by civil society. The party leadership nonetheless continues to communicate and to coordinate with churches, the NCA, organized labor and other regime critics, all of whom coordinate loosely among themselves. The looseness of these relationships allows the players to finesse differences among

themselves. In addition, the relative independence of each's anti-regime activities avoids putting all their eggs into one basket, reducing the risk to each and permitting each to wait for the approach of another to gain purchase with the public before all join in.

SULLIVAN